

## Judge of the Living and the Dead

Psalm 7; Acts 10:39–43

I missed being in the pulpit last Lord's day, but watched the service with Norma by livestream. Adam Ostella's sermon was enlightening, as he taught us to see ourselves as strangers and exiles living in a dangerous, hostile environment, far from our home in heaven. That is the believer's true identity in Christ. Adam's message was practical as well, pointing out that every Christian faces sufferings, greater or lesser, and is comforted by the knowledge that we have been sprinkled by the blood of the covenant which removes our sin. The sufferings we experience are ultimately for God's glory. I am thankful for younger ministers who clearly declare the gospel. I am thankful as well for my colleague Pastor Ralph Rebandt, who announced this past Monday on the steps of the state capitol that he is retiring after 35 years as pastor of Oakland Hills OPC to follow God's call to run for governor of Michigan—a first for our presbytery.

The title of our message this morning is “Judge of the Living and the Dead” (Acts 10:42). To get us thinking about the subject, let me give an illustration. I learned a new expression during Norma's recent physical therapy: “*Up with the good, down with the bad.*” That little slogan reminds a surgical patient which foot to lead with when tackling stairs: when going up, lead up with the good, stronger leg and when going down, lead down with the bad, weaker leg that has just undergone surgery. Doing it this way doesn't require the surgical knee to bend as far, and lets the stronger leg do more of the work. But a patient who has just had surgery may still be in a brain-fog after anesthesia. How to remember? Which foot should lead? The little slogan can help: “Up with the good, down with the bad.” The therapist quipped that “it's kind of like going to heaven: the good go up, and the bad go down!” A clever expression, but is it good theology? Is it really the case that the “good” go up and the bad go down? According to the Bible, there is *none* who does good. All sons and daughters of our forefather Adam are sinners, and God's requirement is absolute perfection. The only one who is truly good is the Lord Jesus Christ. So “up with the good!”—those who by faith are clothed with Christ's righteousness are declared good in the sight of a holy God. The good go “up”—praise his name! Christ, who is enthroned in heaven, is a mighty Savior, having accomplished our salvation through his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Peter reminds the little congregation in Caesarea that the Jews in Jerusalem killed the Lord Jesus by hanging him on a “tree”—another word for the cross. Yet “Him God raised him up on the third day, and showed Him openly.” Christ is the Savior—but there is something more: as Peter closes his sermon he makes a bold assertion: that Christ “was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.” This is utterly astounding. Hear it again: “it is He who was ordained by God to be *Judge* of the living and the dead.” He alone! This can be said of no

other person—no other human being, no other political or religious leader. What is important is not what our family thinks, what our neighbors think, what society thinks; what is important is what *God* thinks. It is God before whom we will one day stand, and to whom we will give account. People know this intuitively and need to hear it authoritatively proclaimed in the preaching of the gospel. The Lord Jesus is in a class by himself. He is the Savior, but he is also the judge. Here is Peter, a dying man preaching to dying men. As Paul will later conform, “It is appointed unto men once to *die*, but *after this the judgment*” (Heb. 9:27). This is a truth that all men know intuitively in their hearts, but that man needs to be regularly confronted with. We are mortal. We will all die. And after that, we will all face divine judgment. We will all stand before God’s judgment throne and give account for what we have done in the body. Peter’s point was that Jesus Christ is this judge. He was ordained by God to be *judge* of the living and the dead. Consider with me three important truths in our text, first,

### **1. A bold claim**

We have previously observed that Peter had a singular message—Christ. Here he is, the man who denied Christ three times during his time of greatest need, the night before his crucifixion, the man who could not stand up for his Lord and Savior, even before a lowly servant girl; the man who forsook his Lord and fled, as he was being nailed to a cruel cross. But after the resurrection, transformed by the Holy Spirit, Peter was a changed man. His timidity was gone. Peter went everywhere, preaching the word. He had a singular message: Christ. Here, before Cornelius and his invited guests, Peter declares the death of Christ: the Jews in Jerusalem killed the Messiah, the anointed one, the innocent Son of God, by hanging him on a tree—that is, on planks of wood made into a cross. The gospels tell us that his body was buried and rested in the grave for three days. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were downcast and despondent that their Lord, the one on whom they had placed all their hopes that it was he who was to have redeemed Israel, had instead been condemned to death, and crucified—hanged on a rough wooden plank to suffocate and die. Yet that was not the end—no, not at all; God the Father made sure of that. Peter declared that “Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly.” The Father would not leave his soul in hell; he would not suffer his holy One to see corruption.<sup>1</sup> Jesus rose from the dead; death could not hold him. The resurrection of Christ is an integral component of the gospel; without it we are of all men most miserable. A dead Savior is a powerless Savior. But Christ is not dead! He is risen as he said, he is risen indeed.

Now Peter could have left it at that, but he did not. Peter goes on to declare that the risen Christ “commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He

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<sup>1</sup> Ps. 16:10, Acts 2:27

who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.” These words are stunning in their audacity. Peter made a bold claim. He was not exaggerating. Here is Jesus, the mighty Savior, the one who died, the one who rose again. But that is not the end of the story. Christ, having proved his divine power by his resurrection, commanded his apostles to preach to all people everywhere that he is the one who was ordained by God “to be judge of the living and the dead.” Peter, an eyewitness of the resurrection, now asserts that the Lord Jesus is *judge*, the one who will judge his people, but not only his people—followers of Christ—but *all* men, “the living and the dead.”

“The living and the dead” is a figure of speech expressing a single idea by the use of two independent words connected by *and*.<sup>2</sup> When God instructs human judges not to respect persons in judgment, but to hear “the small as well as the great” (Deut. 1:17) he means to treat all people with equity and fairness, not just the small and great, but everybody in between—everyone. “The small as well as the great” is a figure of speech meaning *every person* who might come before a human judge.

Similarly, when Peter declares that Christ will judge “the living and the dead,” he means that *all* persons—all men and women everywhere—will stand before Christ when he sits as judge at the last day: the living (those who are still alive at his return) and the dead (those who have died and either gone to be with the Lord, or who have lifted up their eyes in Hades, being in torments, Luke 16:23). Paul explains: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16–17). The dead in Christ will rise first, then those who are still alive at the final day will be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. And when Christ sits as judge, he will judge both “the living and the dead.”

So here was a bold claim: *this man*, Jesus Christ, will sit as judge over all men, the living and the dead, at the last day. What is said of Christ could be said of no one else in all the universe: “it is He who was ordained by God to be *Judge* of the living and the dead.” Christ alone is judge of all; he is utterly unique, a figure without parallel in human history.

There is no record of any of the apostles questioning Jesus on this point, saying to him, “Now, Lord, we know that you rose from the dead, but are you *really* the one who is going to sit as judge over all men at the last day?” The fact that this man rose from the dead, just as he had said he would, abundantly *proves* that he

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<sup>2</sup> The figure of speech is called *hendiadys*, from the Greek words meaning *one through two*.

will be judge over all the earth at the last day. The Bible gives this principle: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, *by man* shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9:6). When there is a murder, it is appropriate that the guilty be brought to justice and convicted of the crime in a human court of law, to be judged by a human judge qualified to hear and decide the case. So at the final judgment it is appropriate that all men stand before him who is a *man*—the God-man, our Savior and King, Jesus the Christ. Jesus proved his divinity by rising from the dead. He is the Son of the Father and child of Mary, God in human flesh. It is appropriate that to him be committed the final disposition of every son and daughter of Adam. We shall all be gathered before him to hear his final sentence at the last day, when he sits as judge over all men, living and dead. No man knows when that will be—it could be soon, or it could be in the distant future. Some of us, like my sister’s father-in-law, who went to heaven this past Friday, will have already gone to glory. Others might still be alive when Jesus returns. But though this is a bold claim, it is the teaching of Scripture: *all* persons—Christian and non-Christian—will stand before the Lord of glory and give account for the things done in the body, whether good or evil. *All* persons everywhere and from every place will stand before our exalted Lord Jesus Christ. Are you ready? Have you repented of your sin and looked in faith to the only sin-bearer, Jesus, the Lamb of God? Are you living out your faith, serving Christ with all that is in you, forsaking the world, resisting the devil, putting to death your sinful deeds and desires, and leading a godly life? Oh, how terrible it will be to face our awesome Judge while living in a state of rebellion against his holy law!

Here, then, is a bold claim, but one that is substantiated by the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ—a miracle without parallel in human history. Jesus Christ is the judge of all. Secondly,

## **2. A singular role**

Peter declares that the risen Christ had commanded the apostles “to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.” The word translated “preach” means to declare with authority as a herald of the King. Here Peter stands in the courtyard of the Roman soldier Cornelius as a chosen herald forcefully declaring the kingdom and majesty of the Lord Jesus, who rose from the grave for the purpose of judging the world. As a Roman, Cornelius had heard all about the Roman gods and goddesses: Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, Minerva, Mars, Venus, Apollo, Diana, Vulcan, Mercury. But they—all of them—are figments of the human imagination. They are not real. None of them will sit as judge. So it is today. Your peers will not be the judge. Your friends and neighbors will not be the judge. So-called “community standards” will not be the judge. The Supreme Court sitting in Washington will not be the judge. The Politburo will not be the judge. The Sanhedrin will not be the judge. The Knesset

will not be the judge. The arbiters of Sharia law will not be the judge. The liberal churches that tell us to take pride in ourselves and just be ourselves and *be* the church—whatever we choose to be—will not be the judge. He who gave his life as a ransom for many and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures will alone be the judge at the final day. His is a singular role, a singular office occupied by a singular person. And though the church will reign with him, sitting “on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28), the Lord Jesus Christ alone will be the supreme judge; his law will be the perfect standard; all judgment will be committed to him. Jesus Christ alone will be the chief justice in that day.

This is a truth recognized by the church in all ages. The Apostles’ Creed declares, “He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he shall come to *judge* the living and the dead.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the Nicene Creed: “[He] ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to *judge* the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.”<sup>4</sup> Christians have many different opinions about many minor matters, but we all agree on one thing: Christ is the judge of the living and the dead. His is a singular role, and he alone fills it. Thirdly, he is

### **3. A divine Messiah**

The fact that Jesus is declared to be the judge at the final day proves that he is divine. Hear again some of the words from our Old Testament text, Psalm 7:8: “The LORD shall judge the peoples; judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, and according to my integrity within me.” Twice it is declared that it is “the LORD”—all capitals, indicating that the original has יהוה, Yahweh, the personal name of the God of heaven. Make no mistake: it is Yahweh who will judge all the peoples of the world. It is Yahweh who will judge David, his saint. The fact that Jesus is declared to be the one who was ordained by God the Father to be the judge of the living and the dead proves that Jesus is Yahweh. If it were not true, than to state it would be to take the name of Yahweh in vain—to abuse and dishonor the holy name of God Almighty. But since it is true, it is good and right to declare indeed that it is Yahweh who will judge the peoples. As Jesus revealed in John 5:22, “The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.” The Son is the eternal Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who was with the Father in eternity past, equal with the Father; to whom the Father gave a people and with whom the Father made an eternal covenant to save them to the uttermost; who came to this earth and was born of the Virgin Mary. So it is Christ, the God-man, who will sit as judge at the final day, declaring the final destiny of

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<sup>3</sup> *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 851

<sup>4</sup> *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, p. 852

every son and daughter of Adam. Yahweh will judge the peoples; the Lord Jesus will judge the peoples; therefore, the Lord Jesus is Yahweh, a divine Messiah.

The Psalmist continues, “Oh, let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, but establish the just; for the righteous *God* tests the hearts and minds. My defense is of God, who saves the upright in heart. *God* is a just judge, and God is angry with the wicked every day. If he does not turn back, He will sharpen His sword; He bends His bow and makes it ready. He also prepares for Himself instruments of death; He makes His arrows into fiery shafts.”

Again, the Psalmist declares that it is *God* who tests the hearts and minds, *God* is a just judge. The Lord Jesus Christ is that God! What is his attitude toward sinful men? Those who believe in the Lord, whose faith is counted for righteousness, can take comfort in the Psalmist’s words, “My defense is of God, who saves the upright in heart.” On the other hand, those who refuse to submit to him and come to him will find that he is a just judge, “angry with the wicked every day.” If the wicked does not repent of his sin and flee to Christ, that just Judge “will sharpen His sword; He bends His bow and makes it ready. He also prepares for Himself instruments of death; He makes His arrows into fiery shafts.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!<sup>5</sup>

In our *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* there is a lovely musical setting of Psalm 7 which we will sing after the sermon: “The LORD will judge the peoples of the world. Judge me according to my rightness, LORD, but let the evil of the wicked end, and be the righteous one’s secure defense. You test all minds and hearts, O righteous God! ... A righteous judge, God judges righteously; the wrath of God is burning every day.”

What is God’s attitude toward you? Are you a penitent, grieving over your sins, looking to Christ to save you? Then know that your defense is of God. He will save you! When you stand before him at the final day, clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ, the Savior will say to the Father, “Father, this is one of my own. This is one whom you gave to me before the foundation of the world. I gave my life for him. I sent my Spirit to regenerate his heart and give him faith. I saved him by my own precious blood. I kept him from the evil one. I brought him to glory. Though a sinner, he is credited with my perfect righteousness. I have said to him, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, enter into the joy of your Lord.’”

But if you die in your sins, you will have no mediator at that final day. You will die without Christ, without God. Your destiny will be the lake of fire.

Many sermons have been preached on the love of God—and what a wonderful love it is! It is altogether proper to preach on God’s love. It is not as popular to preach on God’s judgment, but that is a scriptural theme as well. A proper

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<sup>5</sup> Heb. 10:31

understanding of God's judgment is an appropriate backdrop for understanding God's love.

Peter closes his sermon with the statement "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

At the final day it will be "*up* with the good [those clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ'; *down* with the bad [those who die in their sins, having depended on their own self-righteousness]."

Sinner, look to Christ alone to save you. Amen.